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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement programs for rural communities work best when they respond to particular features of the communities they serve. Research provides conflicting findings about whether rural parents are more or less involved in their children's education than are urban or suburban parents. Even if parent involvement is more prevalent in rural schools, rural educators still face challenges often associated with rural life: geographic isolation, poverty, lack of job opportunities, and lower parental educational attainment. On the other hand, rural residents often place high value on their schools and view schools as a central focus of community life. Successful rural parent involvement programs combine a number of recommended features that allow parents to feel effective in various adult roles, encourage adults to share their talents and model successful strategies of life management, and demonstrate to students the connections between their studies and their eventual success in the workplace. A number of ongoing efforts demonstrate ways that parent-school partnerships can work to improve education in rural areas. Promising approaches include Even Start, piloted in rural Montana; the Total Village Project, a community-wide effort to educate children in rural West Virginia; and the Teacher-Parent Partnership for the Enhancement of School Success, a collaborative effort between the University of South Carolina and 18 rural school districts. (SV)

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RESEARCHERS and educators have long agreed that when parents get involved in education, children try harder and achieve more at school (e.g., Epstein, 1995). Parents who help and encourage their children to learn at home, and who help develop positive attitudes toward school, contribute to the personal growth and academic success of their children.

Various approaches have been developed to help schools gain greater parent involvement. These approaches have several features in common: programs that focus on parenting skills and the development of home conditions that support learning; school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children's progress; the use of volunteers at school or in other locations to support the school and students; and participation by families in decision-making, governance, and advocacy (Bauch, 1994; Davies, 1991).

These approaches, however, were not developed with rural communities in mind. Rural communities differ from urban and suburban ones, and they also differ from one another (Flora, Spears, & Swanson, 1992). Parent involvement programs for rural communities work best when they respond to particular features of the communities they serve.

Opportunities and Challenges

Despite variability among communities, research does point to characteristics that are more common in rural areas than elsewhere and affect educators' efforts to involve parents. It is not clear, however, that rural communities are any more or less likely than urban or suburban ones to involve parents in the educational process. Research provides conflicting findings. A study of 296 schools in Missouri (Sun, Hobbs, & Elder, 1994), for example, found that parent involvement was higher in rural than in urban communities. In contrast, findings from a large national survey of eighth-grade students suggest that parent involvement tends to be higher in urban and suburban communities than in rural communities (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994). Johnson (1990), by contrast, found that suburban parents from middle- and upper middle-class communities were the most involved.

Even if parent involvement turns out to be more prevalent in rural than in urban and suburban schools, rural educators may still face special challenges often associated with rural life. Among these challenges are isolation, poverty, and lack of job opportunities. Isolation restricts rural schools and communities from making use of urban-based resources that might enhance educational programs—museums, research libraries, and colleges and universities (Capper, 1993). Furthermore, the poverty of many rural communities limits parents' ability to provide for their children and to augment their children's education with resources in the home. Finally, the lack of job opportunities makes it harder for rural students to see any financial benefit to attendance or success in school (Bickel & Lange, 1995).

These circumstances lead some educators to conclude that rural families place a low value on the education of their children. This conclusion gains support from the finding that rural parents have lower educational attainment than their urban and suburban counterparts. As the argument goes, parents who lack personal experience of education beyond basic skills often fail to see its importance for their children. Further, they may feel intimidated by school procedures and expectations (Capper, 1993).

However, other evidence demonstrates the high value that rural residents often place on their schools. Not only do they view schools as a central focus of community life (Herzog & Pittman, 1995), residents in many rural areas support their schools with higher tax rates than those imposed in urban and suburban districts, where property values are higher (Stern, 1994). Educators can draw upon this community support to expand parent involvement programs in rural schools. In some rural communities, such programs have mobilized residents to work toward the combined revitalization of schools and rural economies (Miller, 1995).

Beneficial Program Features

Taking into account both the opportunities and challenges posed by conditions of rural life, educators can work to involve parents by setting up programs that include features with well-documented, positive results (see, e.g., Bauch, 1994; Davies, 1991; Hinson, 1990; Swick, 1991). Among the features most often recommended are

- parent enrollment in adult education and parenting education programs;
- cooperative strategies for extending the school curriculum beyond the school walls;
- efforts to help parents provide learning experiences at home;
- home visits by personnel trained to facilitate home-school communication;
- in-classroom involvement of parents, business leaders, and citizens;
- summer enrichment programs for both parents and children;
- community-based learning;
- use of school facilities for community activities; and
- university participation in an advisory and supportive role.

Programs that combine these features are indeed extensive, recognizing both strengths and weaknesses that

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parents may bring to partnerships with their children's schools. Such programs recognize that parenting improves when parents feel effective in a variety of adult roles. But they also take into account the fact that schooling improves when a variety of adults share their talents and model successful strategies of life management. Moreover, when community and business organizations have a visible presence in classroom life, students are more likely to see a meaningful connection between their studies and their eventual success in the workplace.

Promising Approaches

A number of ongoing efforts demonstrate ways that parent-school partnerships can work to improve education in rural areas. These approaches include Even Start, the Total Village Project, and the Teacher-Parent Partnership for the Enhancement of School Success. Noting the effectiveness of projects such as these, educational reform movements in rural states—the Kentucky Education Reform Act, for example—incorporate parent- and community-involvement activities into systemwide efforts to improve school outcomes.

Even Start, which was piloted in rural Montana, had as its expressed purpose "to improve the educational opportunities for children and their parents...through cooperative projects using existing education resources" (Center for Community Education, 1989, p. 2). Building on the key roles that parents play, the pilot project emphasized parents' participation as communicators, supporters, learners, teachers, advisors, and advocates. The project relied on a team of dedicated teachers and administrators who provided direct and indirect support—including focused training—to parents. The pilot demonstrated that the activities and materials developed by the R&D team at Montana State University were useful in getting parents more fully involved in their children's education.

The Total Village Project, which is being implemented in rural West Virginia, advocates a community effort to educate children. Through a family center, coordinated family services, home visits, parent-teacher action teams, mentoring, tutoring, and assistance to teachers, the project seeks to achieve its integrated objectives. These objectives include increases in parent attendance at meetings and activities, quality and quantity of parent involvement at home and school, student self-esteem, and regular attendance. Other objectives aim for improvement in standardized test results and parent, community, and school communication.[1]

The primary purpose of the **Teacher-Parent Partnership for the Enhancement of School Success** was to "implement a school and home based program for young children which raises student achievement and increases educational opportunity" (Swick, 1991, p. 1). To achieve its primary goal, the project also worked to improve parents' self-confidence, increase parent-child interactions, improve home support for education, and strengthen the relationship between school personnel and families. Implemented in rural South Carolina, the project was a collaborative effort between the University of South Carolina and 18 rural school districts. It included training activities for teachers, parents, and children; intensive parent involvement activities; home-school workers; and a summer enrichment program (Swick, 1991).

The promising approaches discussed here all follow Herzog and Pittman's (1995, p. 118) advice: "For rural schools to be successful in combating their problems, they will have to capitalize on their community and family ties." This advice cautions rural educators to view parents and businesses as part of the solution, not as part of the problem. Such a perspective need not overlook the fact that some parents may need special types of assistance, nor does it make the assumption that every community business will contribute positively to the schools. It does, however, favor positive action rather than unproductive blaming. Too often, rural communities are blamed for their problems. Stereotypical images replace thoughtful consideration of these places, their residents, and the problems they face. Projects that bring communities together have the potential to support school improvement, economic revitalization, and a renewed investment by community members in the vigorous traditions of rural life.

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